

Southern Indiana: Fascinating history and an exiting present.

By Sally Campbell Grout

Southern Indiana may be where Hoosier history began, but it's hardly where time stood still. Here's where the stories of the early days of statehood—and the land itself—are told, and where new destinations mean the story is always changing.

Where this place really rocks.

A big part of the Southern Indiana story is told in its rocks, stones, and earth. At Falls of the Ohio State Park (812-280-9970) in Clarksville, the 386-million-year-old fossil beds are among the largest naturally exposed Devonian fossil beds in the world. In fact, they cover more than 220 acres along the Ohio River. Learn more at the interpretive center that overlooks the beds, and offers an exhibit gallery and video presentation.

More rocky tales unfold in Southern Indiana's spectacular caves. Marengo Cave U.S. National Landmark (888-70-CAVES) in Marengo and Wyandotte Caves U.S. National Landmark (888-70-CAVES) both offer incredible looks at Southern Indiana underground. At Marengo, take cavern tours, tour the crystal palace, pan for gemstones, crawl through the cave simulator, and explore an undeveloped natural cave. Wyandotte has immense passageways and huge rooms, along with delicate formations and crystals. Take a Walking Tour, where you stay upright and your clothes stay clean. Or, really get into the spirit on a Natural Adventure Trip and walk and crawl your way through. Cave Country Canoes (888-70-CAVES) offers great ways to see more of the area. Half-day to multi-day trips are available along scenic Blue River.

At Squire Boone Caverns (888-934-1804) in Corydon you'll find adventure above and below the ground. Beneath the earth's surface, see underground waterfalls, stalactites, and stalagmites when you take a cavern tour. Above ground, in the pioneer village, enjoy candle dipping, gem mining, a nature trail, the candy cabin, and one of the largest rock shops in the Midwest. And watch as water from a cave powers the gristmill.

Sites for history buffs.

Some of the people who have lived in Southern Indiana have left an indelible mark there. Here are a few places to learn more about them.

In Evansville, Angel Mounds State Historic Site (812-853-3956) was once a thriving Mississippian Indian town, built between A.D. 1100 and 1300, and occupied by one to three thousand people. Today, at this 600-acre site,

you can learn more about this fascinating area that was once the largest settlement in Indiana.

In the contest for “most inspirational American,” Abraham Lincoln would certainly be a frontrunner. But before he became that respected man, he was a boy growing up in Indiana after moving here from Kentucky. The Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Lincoln City (812-937-4541) is a great place to learn more about his early life. Visit the Living Historical Farm and the Memorial Visitor Center. Take a walk up the wooded Lincoln Boyhood Memorial Trail to the Cabin Site Memorial and to the gravesite of Lincoln’s mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

Lincoln State Park (812-937-4710), also in Lincoln City, is a 1,747-acre park that was established in 1932 as a memorial to Nancy Hanks Lincoln. It has many recreational facilities, including Lincoln Lake, cabins, shelters and trails, and Class A and primitive campsites.

Historic New Harmony (812-682-4488) is the site of two 19th century communal societies. Tours, which are available to the public from March 15-December 30, show sites from both societies, and include the West Street Log Cabins, the Victorian Doctor’s Office, and Thrall’s Opera House. While you’re there, be sure to see other sites, including the Harmonists Labyrinth and Philip Johnson’s Roofless Church. And take time for a meal at the Red Geranium Restaurant.

Back in Indiana’s early days of statehood, its capital was the Southern Indiana town of Corydon. At the Corydon Capital State Historic Site (812-738-4890), see the governor’s headquarters, the capitol building, and other historic structures. What’s more, Corydon’s downtown is a National Historic district, with historical landmarks, shopping, and restaurants.

Another town worth touring: Cannelton, and its Historic District (888-343-6262). See an 1849 cotton mill, and 1868 grade school, and an 1896 courthouse museum, among other sites. Cannelton’s downtown is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ever wonder how the “other half” lived in the 19th century? Get a glimpse at the Culbertson Mansion State Historic Site (812-944-9600) in New Albany. Once considered to be the wealthiest man in Indiana, William S. Culbertson built this home in 1867 for about \$120,000. The 20,000-square-foot mansion features hand-painted ceilings, a carved rosewood staircase, marble fireplaces, and crystal chandeliers. In Jeffersonville, the Howard Steamboat Museum and Mansion (812-283-3728) features 1894 original furnishings, intricate carvings, brass chandeliers, art glass, and a grand staircase. You can also see steamboat tools, photos, paintings, and models.

Want to get a look at some Indiana history, and possibly your own? Willard Library (812-425-4309) in Evansville is Indiana's oldest public library and is one of the state's best genealogical libraries with more than 60,000 volumes. But here's what makes a visit really intriguing: Willard Library is rumored to be haunted.

Great ways to see it all.

What's the best way to explore Southern Indiana? By boat? By car? By train? On foot? Yes. Different modes of transportation can give you different--and incredible--perspectives on the area.

Time is just about the only thing that stands still at the Indiana Railway Museum (800-748-7246) in French Lick; the trains are still "choo chooing" along in style. After you visit the museum, board historic rail equipment for a 20-mile round-trip ride through part of the Hoosier National Forest, the 2,200-foot Burton Tunnel, and limestone cuts. The trip lasts about an hour and 45 minutes, and while it's incredible any time, it's breathtaking in the fall. If part of the Hoosier National Forest (888-343-6262) isn't enough, come back. In this 196,000-acre forest, you can camp, fish, hike, and enjoy the horse and bike trails.

The Ohio River Scenic Byway (812-282-6654) measuring in at 302 miles and designated as a National Scenic Byway in 1996, takes those who travel it past cypress swamps, scenic overlooks, archaeological sites, mansions, power plants, caves, vineyards, orchards, courthouses, and communities.

Modern-day attractions.

Some Southern Indiana destinations are relatively new; others are constantly changing. Put both French Lick Springs Resort & Spa (800-457-4042) and West Baden Springs National Historic Landmark (812-936-4034) in the "historic, but updated" category. The French Lick Resort was established in 1902, and its mineral springs are one reason why guests have been drawn here since the early days. Today, the resort still offers a hot Pluto Mineral Springs bath, as well as a spa, golf, tennis, horseback riding, dining, and other entertainment. In addition, this grand resort is now undergoing a historic preservation effort, which includes a restored lobby and common areas, renovated rooms, and a new spa and pool complex. West Baden, a 1902 National Historic Landmark, was glorious, abandoned, and is now glorious again. The 100' x 200' domed atrium was just one striking feature of this castle-like place in its early days. However, several years went by where it was vacant. But in 1996, West Baden began a massive restoration, and plans are in place to once again return West Baden to a high-end resort.

Want to make the upcoming winter about more than shoveling and school closings? Visit Ski & Snowboard Paoli Peaks (812-723-4696) in Paoli. If the weather doesn't cooperate, the equipment can: Paoli Peaks has the capabilities to make snow.

If you're more of a "sit by the fire" person in the cold weather months, you might want to have something from Winzerwald Winery in Bristow (866-694-6937) on hand for that first blustery night. Owners Dan and Donna Adams honor their German heritage, and the Swiss and German heritage of the area, by operating America's only German- and Swiss-style winery. Enjoy free tastes, tours, vineyards, the wine garden, and the gift shop.

Discover more great destinations throughout Southern Indiana, and the entire state. Visit enjoyindiana.com.